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toward building a new society on the vacant lots of the old . . .

Published on *Independent Reader* (<https://indyreader.org>)

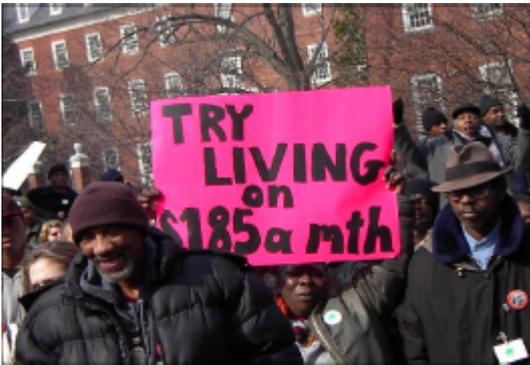
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Homeless in Baltimore, Part 2: Bmore Housing For All

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Tuesday, November 1, 2011 - 11:36



On a hot August morning, I sat down with James Crawford at a table in the apartment building where he lives on North Avenue. I had first called him less than 24 hours before, and he had told me to come see him the next morning at eleven. As we sat alone in a large room full of chairs, tables, and couches, in what I guessed was the lobby of the apartment building, I asked him about his work for Bmore Housing For All (BHFA), an activist organization of currently or formerly homeless people and their allies in which he is an active member.

Note: This article is the second installment in a multi-part series on homelessness in Baltimore. The first part can be read [here](#)[2].

James, a formerly homeless African American veteran, told me that BHFA started four years ago, at a time when the city had said it would put up homeless folks living under the Jones Falls Expressway for 30 days in a hotel. But what would happen to these people on day 31? Would they be put into transitional housing? Would they be put on the street again? Without any clear answer from the city, James decided then that homeless people needed a voice if they were going to be taken seriously, and Bmore Housing For All began.

Since then, BHFA has worked on a number of issues surrounding homelessness, jobs, discrimination, and public housing in Baltimore. Their activities have included organizing Homeless Persons Memorial Day, circulating a petition to keep open the Code Blue shelter when it was scheduled to close (which was ultimately successful), and lobbying city and state governments. Currently, the organization is lobbying for legislation to “ban the box” on job applications about criminal convictions, improving re-entry programs for ex-inmates, and getting rid of the \$40 fee for

visiting parole and probation officers.

One of the success stories James told me was from a couple years ago when the city was about to cut funding for the Temporary Disability Assistance Program (TDAP). TDAP is a program for low-income disabled individuals in Maryland to receive cash, medical, and housing assistance, and can be a critical resource for people who experience homelessness. At least partly due to the extensive efforts and pressure from BHFA, the city not only did not cut funding for TDAP, but actually ended up increasing TDAP funding.

Critical to the group's effectiveness, James tells me, is their first-hand experiences of being homeless. Their personal experience helps them to solve problems, he says.

When I ask James what the biggest problems are regarding homelessness in Baltimore, he tells me that healthcare is the number one reason for people losing their housing. The lack of availability of decent health insurance coverage for low-income people can result in debilitating amounts of debt, sometimes leading to bankruptcy. Our broken healthcare system can put entire families out on the street, unable to make rent payments because of hospital bills.

Second, he says, is the lack of affordable housing in Baltimore. Despite having thousands of unoccupied and abandoned houses around the city, Baltimore City's public housing program has an eighteen-week-long waiting list before you can even get to talk to someone, James tells me. Since many of the homeless individuals he knows have experience in construction, he says it would make sense for the city to employ homeless folks to rehab all the abandoned houses into low-income housing.

Lack of living wage jobs is another major issue in Baltimore. James tells me that there are more homeless people working full-time than I might think. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, on average “a minimum-wage worker would have to work 87 hours each week to afford a two-bedroom apartment at 30% of his or her income, which is the federal definition of affordable housing” . Considering that the City Council recently shot down a measure that would require the new Walmart being built in Remington to pay its workers a living wage, the situation doesn't seem to be improving.

“Homelessness is not an individual problem, it is a societal problem,” James emphasizes. Homeless people are one of the only sectors of society who have no choice but to live their private lives completely in public, he tells me. This leads to a large degree of criminalization of their everyday lives .

James says the challenges of ending homelessness in Baltimore are not a matter of lack of resources, but a lack of political will. “The city is not willing to do what is necessary to end homelessness,” he says. “They overlook the homeless and poor, see them as something the city doesn't need.”

Read Part 1 of Homeless in Baltimore here: [Interview with Adam Schneider \[2\]](#)

More info on Bmore Housing For All can be found on [their website \[3\]](#).

<http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/employment.html> [4]

<http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/criminalization.html> [5]

Photo came from Bmore Housing For All website.

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Links:

[1] <https://indyreader.org/contributor/daniel-staples>

[2] <http://indyreader.org/content/homeless-baltimore-part-1-interview-adam-schneider>

[3] http://baltimoreunitedcongregations.org/?page_id=228

[4] <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/employment.html>

[5] <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/criminalization.html>